THE COBLERS PROPHESIE
A MORALITY
Edited with an Introduction and Notes

BY
SARAH TRUMBULL SISSON
A.B., Butler University, 1923
M.A., Butler University, 1927

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
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To Professor Thomas Whitfield Baldwin, an untiring scholar, an inspiring teacher, a sympathetic and patient friend, I wish to express my deepest thanks for the guidance of this thesis. I regret, for his sake, that the result at this writing could not have been the perfect edition that we both desired. To his colleague, Professor Harris Fletcher, I also owe much. To countless members of the staff of the University of Illinois Library I am likewise deeply indebted for the competence and graciousness of their services, but especially to Miss Eva Faye Benton, librarian of the English Seminar, Miss Isabelle Grant, librarian of the Renaissance Collection, and Miss Edith Jones, librarian of the Classics Seminar.

An Abstract of the Introduction to
AN EDITION OF ROBERT WILSON'S THE COBLERS PROPHESIE

by

SARAH TRUMBULL SISSON

This abstract of the introduction to a text of *The Coblers Prophesie* represents but a section of a thesis, the purpose of which was to present a critical appraisal of the practically unknown play. Other sections in the dissertation not presented in this summary are an emended text, notes on the text, and a bibliography of references employed in the preparation of notes and introduction.

I. The Text

There is only one known edition of *The Coblers Prophesie,* a quarto, entered in the *Stationers' Register* by the printer, John Danter, on June 8, 1594.[1] The title page contains the following information:

> THE / COBLERS / Prophesie. / Written by Robert Wilson. Gent. / [ornament] / Printed at London by John Danter for Cuthbert Burbie: and are to bee sold at his shop nere / the Royall-Exchange. / 1594.

Nine copies of this edition have survived. They may be found in the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, the Bodleian, the Pepysian, the Folger, the Harvard, and the Huntington Libraries, and the private collection of Mr. Carl H. Pforzheimer of New York City. Still another copy was offered for sale in February, 1942, by the Brick Row Book Shop of New York City. In 1897, Wilhelm Dibelius supplied a critical text of the play,[2] John S. Farmer,

1. *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London,* 1554-1640. Ed. by Edward Arber, London, 1875-94, II, p. 653.
2. *Shakespeare Jahrbuch,* XXXIII, pp. 3-48.

in 1911, reprinted the play in the Tudor Facsimile series, and in 1913 published a replica in smaller format. In the following year appeared the Malone Society Reprint based upon a careful collation of the copies in the British Museum, Bodleian Library and Dyce Collection (Victoria and Albert Museum). The text of the present edition is based upon a collation of this reprint and the Tudor Facsimile Text with photographic reproductions of the Harvard and the Huntington Library copies.

II. The Author

All previous approach to Robert Wilson has been involved with the discussion as to whether or not the actor who became a member of the Earl of Leicester's company in 1572 and wrote *The Coblers Prophesie* was the same man who was employed by Henslowe from 1597/8 to 1600. One of the main objects of this study has been to show that there was only one Robert Wilson, known to Elizabethans equally well as playwright and actor. The difficulty in the past in accepting such an assumption has been the absence of Wilson's name from the lay subsidies of June 30, 1588.[3] If Robert Wilson, known to have been a member of the Queen's company in 1583, were still a member of her Majesty's Players at this time, his name would have appeared on this list. Sir Edmund K. Chambers believes that Wilson either had left the company by this time or that the list was incomplete; Professor T. W. Baldwin[4] believes that "if he withdrew, pretty certainly he ceased acting since he could hardly have considered another company better." Credence in this latter point of view is found in a letter written by the Earl of Leicester, Wilson's first patron, to the Town Council of Great Yarmouth, in 1584/5,[5] asking that Robert Wilson be appointed to the office of water-bailiff in the town. While the recommendation was not approved—an act which has several excellent reasons for supporting it—there does

3. Sir E. K. Chambers. "Two Early Player Lists," *Malone Society Collections*, Oxford, 1911, I, Pts. 4 & 5, pp. 348-51.

4. *Organization and Personnel of the Shakespeare Company*, Princeton, 1927, p. 71.

5. *Great Britain Historical Manuscripts Commission.* Ninth Report, London, 1883, p. 317.

seem to be in this recommendation some evidence of the actor's attempt to withdraw from the stage through the influence of the Earl of Leicester.

Upon this powerful figure's death, September 4, 1588, Robert Wilson's name is again traceable in the world of the theater—but only as a playwright—in the printing of *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London.* Internal evidence within this play indicates the date of its composition as late September of 1588. A pun upon "chapboys," emphasis upon the extreme youth of the players, the appearance of the City of London as the *Preface,* accompanied by four angels, Latin phrases, and an entire speech in simple Latin prose such as a school boy would know and be able to recite, a stage direction of the battle with specific reference to "English boys" who "meet the other" seem to point to the fact that this play was written for a boy's company. At this time, however, sufficient evidence cannot be marshalled to prove the actual company affiliation of the playwright. If the theory may be accepted upon the basis of Fleay's assertion,[6] to which I have added certain parallel passages from *The Coblers Prophesie,* that Robert Wilson wrote the greater portion, if not all, of *A Knack to Know a Knave,* (1592), this company would seem to be the Strange-Chamberlain company. The belief that Wilson was not acting at the time of the printing of *The Coblers Prophesie* seems acceptable from the fact 1.) that his name appears on no known actor's list, and 2.) that Thomas Heywood, who must have begun his own career in London as early as 1594,[7] mentions Wilson as an actor "being before my time."[8] Meres' eulogistic comment in *Palladis Tamia* in September, 1598,[9] upon Wilson's extemporal wit displayed in a challenge at the Swan, is a contemporary statement which aids in the assumption that Robert Wilson was still alive at this date. That

6. F. G. *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama,* 1559-1642, London, 1891, II, pp. 310-11.

7. Sir E. K. Chambers. *The Elizabethan Stage,* Oxford, 1923, II, p. 349.

8. *An Apology for Actors.* Reprinted for the Shakespeare Society, London, 1841, p. 43.

9. "Poetrie." Ed. by Don Cameron Allen. Reprinted from the U. of Illinois *Studies of Language and Literature,* 1933, XVI, pp. 343-50.

Henslowe's accounts of Robert Wilson's collaboration with Drayton, Chettle, Dekker, and Munday do not have reference to the supposed "son" of the playwright,[10] who was baptized at St. Botoph's Church, Bishopgate, on September 22, 1579, is evident from the "son's" age at the time of the entries. At this date he would be but eighteen years of age. Another scribe of Henslowe, Houghton, on the other hand, in comparison to Dekker and Drayton, who were about twenty-seven and thirty-four years of age, respectively, was called "yong Horton."

The last days of the actor-playwright were spent in impecunious circumstances. He was buried in the parish of St. Giles, Cripplegate, Nov. 20, 1600,[11] in the neighborhood where Munday and Dekker, the associates of his last days, lived.

III. The Date

The date of composition of *The Coblers Prophesie* has been placed by most critics before 1594. There is but little contemporary allusion within the play upon which conclusions for the exact time may be based, although the general background of the play appears to be the intermittent wars which followed the defeat of the Armada and left the common soldiery in a condition of ever increasing impoverishment. Specific emphasis within the play is laid upon the *Souldier's* poverty, his inadequate clothing, and the general contempt with which his profession is viewed. The only particular circumstance which seems to be stressed in regard to the military situation is the release of prisoners in Oxfordshire and Berkshire for service abroad, which took place on August 24, 1592.[12]

The literary background of the period offers a more definite means of dating: 1.) in the praise extended by Edmund Spenser in *The Tears of the Muses* to a contemporary actor and playwright, whom I believe to be Robert Wilson, and 2.) in the plagiarism of certain writings of Robert Greene: name-

10. *Dictionary of National Biography*. Ed. by Sidney Lee, London, 1900, LXII, pp. 123-4.

11. J. Payne Collier. *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare*. Printed for the Shakespeare Society, London, 1846, I, p. xviii.

12. *Acts of the Privy Council*. Ed. by John R. Dasent, London, 1901, New Series XXIII, for 1592, p. 151.

ly, *Never Too Late,* which was printed in 1590; in *Farewell to Folly,* which was first printed, as far as is known, in 1591; and in part three of the *Connie-Catching* pamphlets, which bears the printing date of 1592, having been entered to T. Scarlett on February 7. From such evidence, in conjunction with the story of prisoner release for impressment, I have dated the play not much later than September of 1592. Proof of the "borrowings" from Robert Greene is substantiated in the notes by reference to many parallel passages, and in one case, at least, from *Farewell to Folly,* a complete "lifting" of a line.

The assertion that Edmund Spenser refers to Robert Wilson rather than to Richard Tarlton to whom the eulogy has been assigned I base upon the following facts: 1.) that Robert Wilson as an actor and playwright was as well-known to his contemporaries as Tarlton and far better known in the latter capacity than was the other comedian; 2.) that much of the present day fame of Tarlton rests upon the spurious *Jest-book* and Wilson's own praise of his fellow actor in *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London;* 3.) that the terms "gentle spirit" and he, from whom "large streams of honey and sweet nectar flow" are not at all applicable to Tarlton, as critics have pointed out; 4.) that at the time of the printing of the *Tears of the Muses* in 1591 Wilson could as readily be said to be "dead of late" and sitting "idle" in "his cell" as John Lyly to whom the words have been applied; and 5.) that the line from the Spenserian tribute,

> And scornful Follie with Contempt is crept,

contains the theme of Robert Wilson's play.

IV. The Source

The realistic setting of *The Coblers Prophesie* has been drawn from contemporary circumstances, as the remarks upon the dating have indicated. The ultimate source of the mythological plot is the story of Mars' adultery with Venus as related by Ovid in the *Ars Amatoria* (II, 561-), although the fable was narrated countless times from its first telling by

Homer in the *Odyssey* (VIII, 307-). Certain changes in emphasis and detail are to be noted in Wilson's treatment of the whole. The original narrative of the triangle concerning Vulcan, Mars, and Venus he has relegated to but three lines of the play, and in so doing has made one notable change. The iron net in which Vulcan captures the culprits does not belong either to the Homer version or to that of Ovid; nor is it described in any of the editions of Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* (Bk. IV, Fable V) in which the tale is likewise told. Comes[13] does describe the net in this way, so that from this popular commentary the slight change in detail seems to have sprung. Indeed, the moral interpretation with which Wilson has clothed the revised Mars-Venus-Contempt liaison seems to have originated with Comes, who follows the outline of Plutarch[14] and Pliny[15] in representing Venus' amours as a natural phenomenon of creation, but at the same time attempts an accord with Christian theology. Venus, according to such allegorizing, is the wife of Vulcan because through her power of generation the necessary balance or proportion of the elements is kept. The quarrel between the three arises because Venus, "friendship" and Mars, "strife," can never agree; nor can Vulcan, "glowing" passion, live peaceably with either.Mars, within the interpretation of the allegorical tradition, finally is entrapped in a net by Vulcan; for even the bravest and the swiftest of the gods when defiled by passion may be overcome without any show of strength.

Two other details which Wilson changes are 1.) the constituency of the Olympian tribunal which passes upon Venus' conduct, and 2.) the transfiguration of Mars from a warrior to a lover by the removal of his armor and the donning of "soft silke." While John Lyly uses this latter description in presenting the transformation of Alexander the Great in *Campaspe* (IV, iii, 6-19), the source seems to be a cut from an

13. Natalis Comitis. *Mythologiae*, sive explicationis fabularum, Francofvriti, 1588. An edition of Comes was printed in Venice as early as 1568, 4°.

14. Chaeronensis Plutarchi. *Moralia* quae Vsvrpantur . . . Venetiis, 1572, p. 8.

15. Caius Plinius Secundus. *Naturalis historiae opus*, Coloniae, 1524. XXXII, p. 152.

illustrative series used in grammar schools, which was executed by Bernard Salamon.[16] From this same source, undoubtedly, is taken the conception of a heavenly jury whose membership is composed of both sexes.

The lively flytings against women, expressed by *Mars*, are medieval in origin rather than classical. Whether they have any relationship to such a popular romance as *Le Roman de la Rose*,[17] which also relates the Ovidian fable, and in the telling adopts certain characteristics manifest in Wilson's play—such as a description of a cleared stage for *Mars'* entrance, *Venus'* excuse of ill health, her employment of servants to aid in her plans, her inveiglement of her pretended lover into going to sleep, her escape into the arms of another—is open to the question of Wilson's knowledge of Old French. Since the section in which the Mars-Venus fable as narrated by Jean Chapinell de Meun was not translated by the sixteenth century, the likelihood is negligible.

V. The Structure

The playwright's working basis for the larger divisions of his play was the thought structure of his morality. Stated in terms of abstraction, the gods stir up war in Boeotia to free her from being contemned for her licentious living, the result of which can only be ruin. Expressed in terms of character, the assembly of the gods incites *Mars*, through *Raph's* prophecy and the *Souldier's* restlessness, to open warfare against *Contempt* and *Venus* for their liaison, whose offspring is *Ruina*. Within such a basic plan can be seen the author's reason for having *Mars* take vengeance upon *Contempt*, instead of following Ovid's fable in having *Vulcan* the third participant in the triangle. The dramatic problem resolves into an open conflict which marshals all the human characters of the play into one of two possible positions: either they will follow *Mars*, who in this case stands for militant good as a representative

16. For the complete background of these cuts and their relationship to the art of the period see the bibliographical notes of an article by T. W. Baldwin. "Perseus Purloins Pegasus," *Philological Quarterly*, XX, no. 3, pp. 361-70.

17. Société des Anciens *Textes Français*, Paris, 1914, 11. 14159-86.

of the gods in condemning evil, or they will follow *Contempt* and bring about eventual ruin to their country.

In the unfolding of the narrative, five natural thought pauses are exhibited. These are emphasized by certain well-established mechanical devices, apparent in the principle of the cleared stage, the closed couplet, and by definitely marked changes of place.

VI. Staging

Since there is no record of *The Coblers Prophesie* ever having been staged, the discussion of its staging must be theoretical. From the internal evidence, Sir Edmund Chambers thinks that the play was "possibly"[18] a Chapel or Paul's play. Such an attribution does not necessarily preclude the dating which I have attributed to the play, although after August of 1591 no boy's company was known to be acting.[19] The one instance of Paul's Boys' appearance at Croyden in Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* before Archbishop Whitgift in August or September of 1592,[20] is conclusive enough to allow for the possibility of another such performance under somewhat similar circumstances.

Evidence of a private performance is manifest in reference to an audience who "sit and see," (I, i) 38-40, a circumstance which can only refer to one of two situations: either the arrangement of a great hall with its playing space level with the audience or erected upon scaffolds, according to the elaborateness of the preparation; or a private theater such as the early Blackfriars under Farrant, which reproduced in all essentials the same effects for audience and player contact.[21] *Ceres'* casting of comfets and the prevalence of somewhat elaborately accompanied dancing and song add to the impression.

Simultaneous staging is reflected in the five "places," first suggested by Sir Edmund Chambers,[22] which are required for

18. *The Elizabethan Stage*, III, p. 35.
19. R. Warwick Bond. *John Lyly*, Oxford, 1902, I, p. 62.
20. H. N. Hillebrand. *The Child Actors*, Urbana, 1926, pp. 104 and 148-9.
21. Chambers. *The Elizabethan Stage*, III, p. 47.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

the setting. These are *Raph's* house, *Mars'* Court, *Venus'* Court, the *Duke's* Court, and the Cabbin of Contempt. Two of them—*Mars'* Court and the *Duke's* Court—are so lacking in any distinguishable descriptive qualities as to offer little or no problem. The dialogue gives sanction to the playwright's intention of the multiple stage by such phrases as "not far from hence"—i.e. from *Raph's* house at which the journey begins to *Mars'* Court, which is but "a flight shoot up the hill," (II, i) 578. *Venus'* Court seems localized for the continuity of the action in the journey by its position close to the Court of *Mars*, "adowne the hill," (II, iv) 776. That the playwright has not destroyed the harmony of simultaneous staging is found in a description of this *domus*:

> Both day and night the dores are ope, (II, iv) 779,

which logically accounts for the exposure of an otherwise secluded scene.

The assignment of a house to *Raph* and a palace or court to the *Duke* assumes two structures in relief at either end of the stage, painted in perspective and architecturally appropriate to the opposed stations of the two characters. Between these lie a wood and a spot near *Charon's* ferry. In the multiple staging of the play only one of these requires distinguishing properties. Whether or not the trees, necessary for depicting the wood, were actually constructed, on the other hand, makes little difference, as the presence of the *Eccho* and the suggested seclusion of the *Muses*, (II, i) 482, create a poetical illusion of a wild and rustic place. In consideration of a private performance they might well constitute a part of the essential properties.

VII. Versification

A somewhat careful study of *The Coblers Prophesie* has revealed that the prosody therein presented is anything but an "olio without plan."[23] The detailed conclusions reached concerning this phase of the study require too much technical

23. J. E. Bernard. *The Prosody of the Tudor Interlude*, New Haven, 1939, p.187.

explanation to be presented satisfactorily in an abstract such as this. It can be said here, however, that Robert Wilson used the same poetical theories and methods employed by his contemporaries and that, in general, the seeming lack of smoothness within the verse lies in an attempt to combine two systems of prosody, that of medieval Latin and that of the native English verse. He has skillfully used, however, the variance between meter and natural stress not only for character delineation but for dramatic situation. Whether his form vary from blank verse to couplet, from fourteener to ballad rhythm, from the jog trot of doggerel to Skeltonics, there is both "rhyme and reason" discoverable in his purpose and treatment.

VIII. Typography and Printing

The typography of the quarto of *The Coblers Prophesie* would offer few problems in Elizabethan printing not presented in other texts of the period were it not for the irregularity of rhythmical pattern discernible in Signature F. This is very noticeable in the variation of spelling from an *s* to a *c* spelling of the running-headline of the Signature. From the typographical evidence of the headlines in the rest of the quarto it would seem that the compositor used the same method he would have employed if he had been splitting his headline between two pages: i.e. using one chase, instead of the usual two, he first removed the type from the four galleys but left the headlines in place; and second, he turned his chase end for end so that when he turned his sheet over to print on the other side his headlines would appear in mirror fashion. Had his headline been set up with identical type—which it was not—and with identical spelling he would have left no trace of his procedure. As it is, we can be fairly certain of his method from Signature B through E.

The error in spelling from an *s* to a *c* spelling of the running headline in Signature F, arising from whatever cause, together with the position it bears within the form, indicates, in view of certain other changes noted that a new set of headlines was set up for the outer form of F and was again kept

set up within one chase. A study of the several special typographical features of Signature F, not occurring elsewhere in the text, leads to the assumption of two compositors, with certain well-defined habits.

VITA

Sarah Trumbull Sisson was born in Mansfield, Illinois, on February 13, 1902. She attended the public schools in Indianapolis, Indiana. In 1919 she entered Butler University, receiving an A. B. from this institution in 1923. For the next two years she taught English and Latin in the high school at Mt. Comfort, Indiana. In 1925 she taught French at Shelbyville, Indiana, and was called from this position the next year to become part-time assistant in Butler University, from which institution she received an M. A. degree in 1927. Since that time she has been a member of the English Department of Butler University, having been on leave of absence in 1929-30 for graduate work at the University of Chicago and again from February, 1941, to June, 1942, at the University of Illinois. She is a member of Phi Kappa Phi.